



**MIGNEX Background Paper**

# **Tackling the root causes of migration**

**Carlos Vargas-Silva**  
University of Oxford

**Jessica Hagen-Zanker**  
ODI

**Jørgen Carling**  
Peace Research Institute Oslo

**Ignacio Carrasco**  
University of Oxford

**Mathias Czaika**  
Danube University Krems

**Marie Godin**  
University of Oxford

**Marta Bivand Erdal**  
Peace Research Institute Oslo

## Suggested citation

Vargas-Silva, C. Hagen-Zanker, J. Carling, J. Carrasco, I. Czaika, M. Godin, M. and Erdal, M.B (2023) *Tackling the root causes of migration*. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. Available at [www.mignex.org/d065](http://www.mignex.org/d065).

**MIGNEX**

MIGNEX (Aligning Migration Management and the Migration-Development Nexus) is a five-year research project (2018–2023) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on migration, development and policy. It is carried out by a consortium of nine partners in Europe, Africa and Asia: the Peace Research Institute Oslo (coordinator), Danube University Krems, University of Ghana, Koç University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Maastricht University, ODI, the University of Oxford and Samuel Hall.

See [www.mignex.org](http://www.mignex.org).



MIGNEX has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 770453.

**MIGNEX Background Papers**

The MIGNEX Background Papers are scientific papers containing the documentation and analyses that underpin the project results. Selected insights from background papers are also presented in non-technical form in other formats, including MIGNEX Policy Briefs and MIGNEX Reports.

**Acknowledgements**

This document was reviewed by Melissa Siegel (Maastricht University), Rashid Menon (Lahore University of Management Sciences) and Jason Gagnon (OECD) as part of MIGNEX quality assurance and review procedures. The authors are also grateful to Tom Hart and Sam Sharp for valuable comments and additions to the document. The content of the document, including opinions expressed and any remaining errors, is the responsibility of the authors.

**Publication information**

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons CC BY NC 4.0 License. You are free to share and adapt the material if you include proper attribution (see suggested citation), indicate if changes were made, and do not use or adapt the material in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

Peace Research Institute Oslo, Oslo, Norway

December 2023

ISBN (print):  
978-82-343-0535-1

ISBN (online):  
978-82-343-0536-8

The views presented are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the institutions with which they are affiliated. The European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information herein.

**History of changes**

Version	Date	Changes
1	29 December 2023	Version submitted as official deliverable to the EC.

## Contents

### **Introduction 1**

Does migration have root causes? 2

Can migration be managed by addressing its root causes? 4

### **Livelihoods, governance, and corruption: key root causes of migration 6**

#### **Is there an arsenal of effective policies to tackle the root causes of migration? 7**

Tackling job scarcity is difficult and expensive, but it is worth exploring holistic approaches to economic hardships 8

Monitoring and punishment may decrease corruption, but only in the short-term 10

Civil servant autonomy can improve government efficiency, though perceptions of government are hard to improve 11

### **Conclusion 12**

### **References 14**

---

# Tackling the root causes of migration

We examine policy options to tackle the ‘root causes’ of migration; defined as policy efforts to improve the economic, social and political conditions in places of origin with the aim of reducing aspirations to migrate internationally by making it more feasible and desirable to stay. We discuss root causes on the concept’s own terms, with the aim to make policy options clear, not to endorse it.

—

Limited livelihood opportunities, poor governance, and high levels of corruption are three key root causes that affect international migration aspirations.

—

Policies tackling the root causes of migration could expand people’s choices in origin areas, which is better aligned with development ambitions, and is more ethical.

—

Yet, in practice, there is a scarcity of policy tools proven to deliver the kind of transformation necessary to reshape migration aspirations.

## Introduction

This paper is framed in response to the call for proposals that funded the MIGNEX project, which states that projects “*should also allow a better understanding of the root causes of migration, their interplay with other determinants and the two-way interaction between migration and development processes.*” MIGNEX analysis seeks to strike a balance between *engaging with the funder’s requests*, and *not doing it uncritically*. This balance is essential for fruitful interaction between independent research and policy development. The discussion draws heavily on the MIGNEX Background Papers related to Work Package 6 of the project, which explored the processes that spur and shape migration (Carling et al., 2023; Caso et al., 2023; Czaika and Weisner, 2023; Erdal et al., 2023).

---

As we explain below, the root causes of migration can be best understood as a subset of the *drivers of migration*, while these drivers are, in turn, a subset of the *determinants of migration*. These are not simple semantic differences, but affect how migration itself is understood and addressed via different policy tools.

Our starting points are the following two assumptions:

1. Migration has ‘root causes’.<sup>1</sup>
2. Migration can *potentially* be managed by addressing its root causes.

In migration policy debates, these assumptions are common. However, there are diverse views on whether root causes is an acceptable label. There is a view that would entirely reject the label as inappropriate, while others see it as key concept to understand the migration process. Furthermore, there is no clear agreement on how, or whether, migration can be managed, whether that is understood to mean stopped, or regulated in ways that ensure migration takes place in a safe, regular and orderly fashion, by tackling its root causes.

It is valuable, therefore, to examine the two assumptions critically to identify their kernels of truth and limitations.

## Does migration have root causes?

Uses of root causes in other fields illustrates the effect of this label from a framing perspective. It is used in engineering, health care, and conflict resolution, for instance, where root causes are understood as the beginning of causal chains that result in adverse outcomes – such as mechanical failure, medical errors, or political violence. Root causes are not commonly associated with positive outcomes, such as democratisation or economic development.

When using root causes in relation to migration, the implication is that migration is often seen as an adverse outcome. Root causes are indeed discussed mainly in the context of those forms of migration that are commonly identified by policy, in the EU and beyond, as the most challenging to regulate in predictable ways, such as in relation to irregular border crossings and people seeking asylum. The concept’s resurgence in European policy was triggered, in part, by the ‘migrant crisis’ of 2015–2016 and the rise in the number of migrant deaths.

During our research, we have engaged with academics and practitioners who see the implied negative framing as unfortunate, but diverge in their view of root causes of migration. Some want to abolish the concept entirely; others would like to recast it in more positive terms. Our approach is a pragmatic one of taking the essence of current usage as a given, but advancing a more precise understanding of what “root causes” entail and when the concept can justifiably be applied. Our starting point is the following definition (Carling et al. 2023:7):

---

<sup>1</sup> In the rest of the document, we are not using quotes for the term root causes but, as explained in the discussion, the use of this term is open to debate.

Root causes of migration are widely experienced hardships to which migration is a possible response, that are perceived to be persistent, immediately threatening, or both.

Several key observations about this definition and its components are important. First, root causes are here defined on the concept's own terms, with the aim to make its logic clear, rather than to endorse it. Second, the definition spans the problematic divide between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration and covers various forms of hardship. Third, it also excludes many forms of hardship, such as those that are particular to an individual or a household. Finally, many other factors determine whether root causes result in migration. These include migrant networks as well as obstacles and opportunities resulting from migration policy and border control.

In our framework, the root causes of migration are a subset of the *drivers of migration*, which also include factors such as transnational networks and employment opportunities at the destination. These drivers are, in turn, a subset of *determinants of migration*, which also include individual attributes, such as gender and age, which often have a strong influence on migration aspirations and behaviour.

In sum, 'root causes' are a meaningful label for *some* causes of *some* migration. The relevant causes are 'widely experienced hardships', as described in the definition above. The relevant forms of migration are more complex to define.

It is worth noting, however, that most migration globally is *internal*, and while less applied in such contexts, root causes are likely to apply in a similar fashion there, that is, to *particular subsets* of internal migration.

Root causes are relevant only for migration that is *instrumentally valued* by the migrant (Carling 2014). That is, migration that serves as a means to an end that could potentially also have been obtained locally. For instance, when people migrate in search of basic security, a decent livelihood, or opportunities for professional development, they could potentially have stayed if these conditions were available at home. By contrast, there are also people who migrate, or wish to migrate, because migration is *intrinsically valued*. That is, they see migration as desirable in its own right, by virtue of the experience and broadening of horizons that it entails. Such motivations are widespread, also in low- and middle-income countries. The vocabulary of root causes obscures this aspect of migration.

Root causes is most appropriate when migration has an element of adversity, reflecting the general usage of root causes to describe the origins of causal chains that end in adverse outcomes. A potential actor-centred definition would be that the migration related to root causes is a *migration that the migrants would have preferred not to undertake if circumstances at the origin were different*.

People who risk dangerous journeys to escape violence, or endure exploitation abroad to feed their family are cases in point. While there is always a degree of agency, there are millions of migrants, including refugees, who would have preferred to remain, but have left their homes because of hardships that can be described as root causes.

There are also millions of migrants who have left for reasons that cannot be directly linked to hardship. For instance, migration in search of professional opportunities might have root causes in the form of insufficient resources or institutionalised nepotism, but it might also reflect specific professional interests or different opportunities elsewhere.

A key caveat, therefore, in using root causes is the possibility that it misrepresents migrants and their aspirations.

### Can migration be managed by addressing its root causes?

If migration is driven by hardships that have negative effects on people and societies, it seems sensible to alleviate the hardships. This would provide individuals with a genuine choice regarding whether to migrate or stay. This is the logic of targeting root causes to manage migration. The prospect of targeting root causes as a policy strategy is as old as the notion of root causes itself (Castles and Van Hear, 2010). However, root causes must be linked to more recent trends in approaches to migration policy. The past two decades have seen a series of connected shifts in this respect.

First, the increasing importance of ‘migration management’, which places migration within holistic and ‘collaborative’ relations. These collaborations often reflect power dynamics between countries of origin, transit and destination. Some level of collaboration with countries of origin and transit is deemed necessary, as part of a heavy-handed containment policy, because it is seen to enable the return of migrants without the right to remain.

Such ‘collaboration’ intersects with a second shift, namely the externalization of migration policy – the implementation of control measures in countries of origin and transit, far beyond the borders of the countries devising the policy. Externalization has come mainly in the form of obstructive measures such as visa requirements and carrier sanctions, which make it harder for prospective migrants to reach the borders of their intended destination.

The preceding paragraphs provide only cursory sketches of policy developments that have been subject of extensive research. However, they represent important context for the new analyses we present in this paper.

A policy of addressing root causes is partly an extension of these trends, since it keeps the focus *spatially* and *causally* far from the borders of the destination countries. At the same time, a policy of addressing root causes can potentially evade some of the criticism levelled at the related policy trends. Deploying control measures far away (*externalization*) and using economic power to enlist countries of origin and transit in control efforts (a potential aspect of *migration management*) can be seen as coercive and invasive strategies for keeping migrants away.

By contrast, addressing root causes holds the promise of expanding the range of choices for potential migrants by making it more feasible or desirable to stay. In this sense, it is not only more sustainable, but also more ethical.

Still, a migration policy focused on alleviating root causes can be questioned on, at least, three key grounds.

- 1. Wishful thinking.** If the timeframe is inappropriate for addressing challenges. For instance, if we focus on the lack of satisfactory livelihoods as a root cause of migration, it could take a long time for conditions in low-income countries to improve to a level where international migration is no longer desirable. Many effects of policies focused on improving livelihoods will not be discernible for a generation or longer.
- 2. Ineffective, or even counterproductive effects.** We simply do not know much about what interventions work for addressing many root causes. Moreover, migration aspirations and out-migration flows tend to *increase* with per capita income in low-income countries. Alleviating poverty as a root cause of migration is unlikely to have the desired effect.
- 3. Unethical.** If efforts to alleviate hardships in low- and middle-income countries are steered towards those hardships that affect migration, as opposed to those hardships that matter the most to the people who are affected.

These objections reflect the political and ethical complexity of managing migration by addressing root causes. For instance, it matters whether the funding to alleviate root causes comes from migration management (home affairs) or from development cooperation, and how much weight is placed on different forms of outcomes. If development aid is reallocated to places and sectors where it is expected to alleviate root causes of migration, the effectiveness in terms of development outcomes might drop. This is important as there is a perception that the root causes narrative has boosted aid budgets around the globe.

Clear objectives are a precondition for successful policy, and for evaluating effectiveness. So what would a policy of ‘tackling the root causes of migration’ seek to achieve? We offer two alternative formulations of objectives to illustrate the issues at hand.

Objective A: Tackling the root causes of migration means affecting societal factors in countries of origin to minimise aspirations related to undesired international migration and making migration management less dependent on control measures.

This objective resembles current control measures and focuses on migration outcomes. It represents a form of social engineering where the end potentially justifies the means in problematic ways. For instance, available evidence suggests that migration aspirations could be reduced by ensuring that the poor stay poor, while promoting upward mobility among the middle classes. The outcomes of interest are straightforward to measure, although it may be difficult to identify the isolated effect of policy measures.

Objective B: Tackling the root causes of migration means affecting societal factors in countries of origin to maximise people’s confidence in building local futures and minimise the perceived necessity of undesired migration.

This objective focuses on expansion of choice. While it is broader than Objective A, it is more precise with respect to migration. The point is not to



reduce undesired migration across the board, but to make it unnecessary for meeting basic needs. The outcomes of interest are elusive and can be hard to measure, but they are easier to align with the objectives of development cooperation as well as national policy priorities.

Both objectives might end up conflicting with meeting the *demand* for certain types of migrant labour, be it high-skilled professionals or manual workers, if ‘tackling root causes’ proves effective. From the self-interested perspective of high-income destination countries, reflected in Objective A, this would be an unintended and unwanted consequence. Based on the more pragmatic and humanist perspective of Objective B, it would be a sign of success that migrant labour comes only in the form of people who have a genuine choice between staying and leaving.

In sum, addressing root causes can, in theory, be a way of managing some forms of migration. Yet, the challenges of ensuring desired effects with a justifiable use of resources are substantial.

## Livelihoods, governance, and corruption: key root causes of migration

In this section, we highlight what we have learned about the root causes of migration in the MIGNEX project. The discussion in the previous section indicates that the term root causes often describes the fundamental reasons for negative outcomes and presents migration as a problem to be solved. This is the view among some policymakers, particularly in high-income destination countries (Godin et al., 2021), but it is not unique among them. Erdal et al., (2023) explain that many individuals in sending countries see migration as a problem, for reasons that include the loss of young members of the community and the destabilising effect that this has on its social and economic fabric, among others.

Work Package 6 of the MIGNEX project focuses on the processes that spur and shape migration. Several of the deliverables in this Work Package provide key insights on the root causes of migration.

Carling et al., (2023) propose four domains of root causes to focus on:

- Livelihoods and poverty
- Governance and public services
- Security and conflict
- Environment hazards and stresses

The idea is that these four domains should accommodate the factors that are typically related to the root causes of migration.

In addition to providing conceptual definitions, MIGNEX research has provided empirical evidence on the role of these root causes in driving migration aspirations. Carling et al., (2023) conducted statistical analysis using survey data based on interviews with more than 13,000 young adults in ten countries and found that several root causes played a significant role in shaping migration aspirations, while others did not. Safety, security,

environmental hazards and stresses were not consistently important explaining factors for migration aspirations.

Hardships related to livelihoods – both in terms of availability and quality – is one of the root causes that most clearly affect migration aspirations. Job availability is often linked to livelihood improvement and to the root causes of migration. The idea is that if individuals have job opportunities in their home countries and, in particular, *good* opportunities, then this should decrease migration aspirations. This also resonates with findings in MIGNEX qualitative research. For instance, focus group participants in different research areas cited in Erdal et al., (2023) stated that:

No one is insane [enough] to leave their beloved country and seek migration in other countries when they have security and work opportunities. (Behsud, AFG2A)

People had to leave São Nicolau because there are no jobs, so people have to leave the island in order to look for another way of living. (São Nicolau, CPV1B)

At first, we used to have a lot of factories around this community and the youth were able to get some jobs to do but it got to a point they all collapsed and that left them with no choice than to migrate so as to earn a living. (New Takoradi, GHA3D)

Absence of job opportunity within their country is the pushing factor for migration. (Moyale, ETH3A)

People travel abroad because the jobs are not available here. If the jobs are available, people will not migrate. (Ekpoma, NGA3B)

Carling et al., (2023) find that, in addition to livelihoods, the two other key root causes affecting migration were poor governance and high levels of corruption. This also corresponds to the findings of Czaika and Weisner (2023), who used a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), a methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative data, to explore the root causes of migration. They found that weak governance and public services is the critical root cause shaping migration outcomes. Yet, they also explain that it is not just about addressing that domain, as no single root cause alone is driving migration aspirations.

## Is there an arsenal of effective policies to tackle the root causes of migration?

In this section, we discuss the practicalities related to tackling the root causes of migration. As indicated earlier, we put ethical and other considerations aside and ask: would it be possible to tackle specific root causes and then as a next step, reduce migration aspirations (if that were a policy priority)? We do not discuss this second step, i.e. whether the policy approaches affect migration (aspirations or decision-making), but instead take a step back and look at the extent to which such policies are effective in achieving their initial development aims. We discuss public policies that are not targeting migration, but that may affect it (OECD, 2017).

While we recognise that there is a long list of potential root causes of migration that could be the target of policies (e.g. agriculture, finance, education, social protection, see OECD (2017)), we focus on root causes found to be particularly relevant in both the statistical and QCA analysis in Work Package 6 (Carling et al., 2023 and Czaika and Weisner, 2023 respectively) – that is livelihoods, governance and corruption. These three areas are also at the core of much research and discussion on development.

We link the analysis to additional empirical evidence, in particular, for the ten countries covered by the MIGNEX project (i.e., Afghanistan, Cabo Verde, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Tunisia, Turkey, Pakistan, Somalia). This is not a systematic review of the evidence, but just examples of the key factors highlighted in each case.

### **Tackling job scarcity is difficult and expensive, but it is worth exploring holistic approaches to economic hardships**

Addressing job scarcity and its far-reaching implications for livelihoods stands as a critical endeavour in mitigating economic hardships as a root cause for migration. The challenge of the matter lies in the task of job creation, a challenge fraught with complexity and substantial costs. To grapple with the root of economic hardships, a multifaceted approach seems imperative, encompassing policies that extend beyond mere job provision to tackle underlying issues of livelihood improvement, inequality reduction, and poverty alleviation.

The idea of creating a job can take several forms, contingent on the intricacies of the labour market. In situations where the demand for workers is high, the focus shifts to bridging the gap between labour demand and supply, that is, to connect workers with employers. While jobs may already exist, impediments such as information gaps, transportation hurdles, or specific skill deficiencies often obstruct individuals to take full advantage of these work opportunities. Interventions that facilitate the job search process and provide tailored training emerge as potential solutions in such contexts.

A key facet of this discussion revolves around youth unemployment, a group with a pronounced tendency to migrate. Initiatives and studies targeting youth employment, including the MIGNEX project, have yielded varied results globally (Erdal et al., 2023). For example, business training and personalised coaching sessions, among other benefits, had been introduced in entrepreneurial classes of undergraduate curricula in Tunisia in 2009, yielded limited impact on employment rates and entrepreneurship. Premand et al. (2016) analysed this programme and found that the intervention did not increase the employment rate of participants and had only a small impact on entrepreneurship. Echavez et al., (2014) explored a three-month livelihoods training in Afghanistan that offered skills to engage in income-generating activities. The results suggest that the programme only had a small impact on employment and household income.

These are not isolated findings. Larger systematic reviews suggest that the impacts of active labour market programmes directed at youth worldwide often do not have an impact on employment and, when having a positive

impact, the implications for employment tend to be small (Card et al., 2010, 2018; Kluve et al., 2019).

However, in many of the countries explored by MIGNEX, creating a new job is more complicated than just linking employers with potential employees. In many of these countries, structural economic challenges contribute to a lack of sufficient jobs. Therefore, 'creating jobs' in this context entails creating *new jobs*. Interventions in this context need to target specific sectors, expanding existing businesses or even creating new businesses that require capital and a substantial number of operational expenditures (basic services, insurance, equipment, rent, etc.). This is a more challenging and expensive task than the one discussed above.

Large-scale initiatives of government investment, for instance the New Deal in the United States during the 1930s, can lead to a substantial increase in the number of jobs available in this context, but these initiatives come at a substantial cost. For instance, Robalino (2018) estimates that an investment of USD 10 million in Tunisia would create, at most, 300 jobs in sectors such as trade and construction, at a cost of about USD 30,000 per job. In other sectors, such as health and tourism, each new job would cost closer to USD 100,000.

Governments can further incentivise job creation through mechanisms like tax cuts and financial incentives for employers hiring new workers. Despite these efforts, major government programmes, like the 2008 Employment Package in Türkiye, a programme that was aimed at creating new jobs for women and men aged between 18 and 29 years by subsidising employers' social security contributions for newly hired young employees, have seen limited success. Ozdamar et al., (2021) suggest that while positively affecting formal sector employment and full-time work, they often lead to the formalization of existing jobs rather than creating new ones.

In sum, traditional policy alternatives for job creation fall short of delivering the transformative change required to uproot migration's economic root causes in many countries.

If job creation policies are not enough, what else could work? An alternative could be to adopt a holistic approach that combines policies directed at job creation with a range of other targeted policies for addressing the root causes of economic challenges. For instance, by promoting economic diversification through investing in various sectors that reduce dependence on a single industry. Land and agricultural reforms that address land tenure issues and promote sustainable agricultural practices can boost agricultural productivity, improve rural livelihoods, and reduce pressure on urban areas (Holden and Otsuka 2014). Economic diversification and agricultural reforms in combination with infrastructure development to improve connectivity, transportation, and energy supply may conjointly not only stimulate economic activity but also enhance the overall business environment, making the country more attractive for international but also domestic investment (Ajakaiye and Ncube 2010). The latter, however, also requires access to finance for individuals and businesses, especially in underserved, poor areas. This can, for instance, be achieved through the establishment of microfinance institutions, financial literacy programs, and measures to

increase banking accessibility (Grohmann et al 2018). In addition, actively promoting international trade and attracting foreign direct investment by improving the business climate, reducing trade barriers, and participating in regional economic partnerships may all spur economic activity.

This more holistic approach may hold some promise for improving livelihoods and reducing out-migration in regions across the world, but we lack evidence of successful case studies that can be easily replicated at a larger scale and is likely to come at a substantial financial cost.

### **Monitoring and punishment may decrease corruption, but only in the short-term<sup>2</sup>**

During the 1990s, the World Bank, United Nations and other international organisations started a “good governance” agenda focused on low- and middle-income countries. The concept of good governance remains loosely defined, but includes aspects such as reducing corruption, increasing accountability, respecting the rule of law and political stability (Nanda, 2006) and often (implicitly) puts forward OECD country institutions as the gold standard (Booth, 2012). It also became common to link development assistance to a country with their governance record. The idea is that good governance is necessary for aid to be effective, therefore, donor countries should focus their assistance in countries with good governance to maximise the benefits of aid (Bourguignon and Sundberg, 2007).

Despite its continued popularity, the good governance agenda is highly disputed. While there is general agreement that politics, governance and institutions lie at the heart of many development challenges, a more nuanced perspective argues that one-size-fits-all “good governance” policy measures are misplaced (Booth, 2012). Instead, there is a move towards best fit, rather than “good governance” best practice, in governance reforms (Booth, 2012; Grindle, 2004; Levy, 2014).

One key element of the good governance agenda is fighting corruption. Corruption increases the cost of public service provision and doing business. It is like an additional tax on top of everything. One way to tackle corruption is to increase monitoring and enforce punishments (Banerjee et al., 2012). Increasing monitoring can take different forms, from additional government audits to increased grassroots participation. Yet anti-corruption efforts themselves have often been corrupted; measures only work if they involve actors with the power, capabilities and interests to ensure their success (Khan and Roy, 2022). Moreover, anti-corruption measures have been shown to have unintended consequences with worse outcomes for the most vulnerable and poor (Fisman and Golden, 2017).

So, what works to fight corruption? A systematic review of anti-corruption measures finds that efforts are most effective when other contextual factors support them and when they are integrated into a broader set of institutional reforms, highlighting the relative success of public financial management reforms in some contexts (Rocha Menocal, 2015). Drawing on a large survey of the evidence on the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures, Olken and

---

<sup>2</sup> Tom Hart (ODI) and Sam Sharp (ODI) contributed to this section.

Pande (2012) suggest that while there is some short-term effectiveness of measures to fight corruption, in the longer-term corrupt policymakers find alternative ways to profit from corrupt behaviour. They conclude their analysis by stating that:

On the one hand, there has been a revolution in the measurement of corruption, and this has in turn led to a blossoming of the academic literature on corruption. On the other hand, if we were asked by a politician seeking to make his country eligible for Millennium Challenge aid or the head of an anticorruption agency what guidance the economic literature could give them about how to tackle the problem, we realized that, beyond a few core economic principles, we had more questions to pose than concrete answers.

The Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) research consortium draws on ten years of research including in Ghana, Nigeria and Pakistan and concludes that anti-corruption efforts that have the most potential are at the sectoral level. This is the level at which corruption can be the most damaging and where it is most feasible to find actors with the power and capabilities to support the enforcement of rules in their own interest (Khan and Roy, 2022). Specific sectoral approaches with potential are noted, for instance, for Pakistan's pharmaceutical sector (Dawani and Sayeed, 2020) and Nigeria's 'miracle examination centres' (Agwu et al., 2022), with potential policies heavily reliant on understanding of power and incentive structures and the involvement of local/ horizontal actors, rather than relying on top-down measures.

In sum, common policy alternatives to fight corruption can be effective in the short-term or at the sector level. However, corruption tends to be an incredibly protracted issue across different sectors and institutions, and where configurations of power and capabilities do not support a rule of law, anti-corruption efforts are likely to have limited results (Khan and Roy, 2022). This means that short-term or sector specific measures are unlikely to have a long-term or large enough effect that would stop corruption being one of the root causes of migration.

### **Civil servant autonomy can improve government efficiency, though perceptions of government are hard to improve<sup>3</sup>**

Other forms of government inefficiency included on the 'good governance' agenda can have different consequences for government finances and public service provision than that explained above for corruption. For example, take the case of unfinished projects. That is, the government starts building a school, hospital, or similar project and leaves the project half-finished and inoperative. This is common in many low- and middle-income countries. Williams (2017) estimates that in Ghana around one in three of the projects that start are never completed. These projects account for 20% of all local government investment.

Corruption means that the cost a project is inflated, but there are incentives to finish the project as each step of the process allow (corrupt) contractors to

<sup>3</sup> Tom Hart (ODI) and Sam Sharp (ODI) contributed to this section.

make additional profits. Other forms of government inefficiency, such as a tendency of starting projects for which there are no sufficient resources or unstable government priorities (i.e. money was available, but something else becomes more important during construction) are more likely to lead to unfinished projects.

The traditional ways of tackling the issue of government efficiency are monitoring and incentives for performance. The first step is to measure project and public service delivery, which is still uncommon in many low- and middle-income countries (Banerjee et al., 2007). Then there is a reward for those civil servants with good achievement indicators. However, the evidence for countries such as Nigeria and Ghana suggests that monitoring/incentives schemes do not work well. In fact, these schemes seem to have the opposite effect, leading to lower completion rates, etc. (Rasul and Rogger, 2018; Rasul et al., 2018). Yet, these studies do suggest that given civil servants autonomy over the projects, i.e. decision-making power, is associated to higher government efficiency and project completion rates. There was less evidence of a connection between corrupt behaviour and civil servant autonomy.

In sum, there is some evidence that, given greater decision-making power, professional civil servants can improve government delivery, even in a context in which corruption is common. Further evidence suggests that greater trust in institutions also associated with higher degrees of government effectiveness, and that such trust can be fostered by greater citizen involvement (Bosio, 2023), similarly to the schemes discussed above which increase autonomy of civil servants.

Yet the question of how improvements in service delivery affect state legitimacy, and potential migration aspirations specifically, is not straightforward. The Secure Livelihoods Research (SLRC) project, drawing on ten years of research in fragile and post-conflict countries, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, found that it is not access to government services that matters for state legitimacy, but how they are delivered, in particular whether there are effective grievance and accountability mechanisms (Nixon and Mallett, 2017). This suggests that improving the efficiency of how services are run and anti-corruption measures could improve perceptions and legitimacy of the state. Yet, further in-depth research showed that it depends on the "salience" (i.e. relevance) of particular service in a particular context to state legitimacy (McCullough and Papoulidis, 2020). For instance, in Pakistan the provision of decent healthcare and education was irrelevant as access to land was the more salient issue in terms of explaining state legitimacy (McCullough and Toru, 2019). This suggests that once again the effectiveness of government efficiency is dependent on the underlying political economy and context, pointing to the futility of blueprint approaches.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to shed light on whether and how migration can be managed by tackling root causes. We have examined whether various policies achieve their development aims, which in turn aim to shape

migration aspirations, and/or out-migration. We build on the preceding MIGNEX analyses of the processes that spur and shape migration (Caso et al. 2023; Czaika and Weisner, 2023; Carling et al. 2023; Erdal et al., 2023) and critically examine two assumptions in migration policy debates: (1) that migration has root causes; and (2) that migration can potentially be managed by employing effective policies to address its root causes.

A formal definition of root causes was proposed in Carling et al. (2023), namely: ‘Root causes of migration are widely experienced hardships to which migration is a possible response, that are perceived to be persistent, immediately threatening, or both’. From this definition follows that root causes is a meaningful label for *some* causes and *some* migration forms. Root causes of migration are defined as specific drivers related to widely experienced *hardships* classified in four domains: Livelihoods and poverty; Governance and Public Services; Security and Conflict; and Environmental hazards and stresses. Moreover, root causes align more effectively with migration that is instrumentally valued and that has an element of adversity.

With a formal definition of root causes of migration in place, a closer examination of the second assumption became feasible, the main objective of this paper. Examining whether migration can in principle be managed by tackling its root causes involves several steps. On the one hand, identifying root causes that influence migration aspirations. MIGNEX research shows that hardships related to livelihoods, together with high levels of corruption and poor governance were three root causes of fundamental importance (Carling et al., 2023; Erdal et al., 2023; Czaika and Weiser 2023).

Next, we reviewed some of the existing policies in these areas and their capacity to affect these root causes, with a focus on the MIGNEX countries when possible. In practice, this task meant moving from the migration related literature to the one on development. In other words, we were interested to what extent there are effective policy instruments to tackle these hardships, which would be needed to potentially reshape migration aspirations.

Our review indicates that there is a scarcity of policy options that are proven to deliver the kind of transformation necessary to reshape those root causes that affect migration aspirations. Specifically, traditional job creation schemes tend to fall short in effectively tackling the root of economic hardships. Anti-corruption policies are unlikely to have long-term or large enough effects to stop corruption unless they are integrated into broader national and international institutional reforms. What works to increase government efficiency is challenged by the intricacies of how service delivery affects state legitimacy in each context.

Effective policy impact on development could use holistic and comprehensive approaches. In particular, to improve livelihood hardships, multifaceted policies to promote economic diversification through investment across sectors, inequality reduction, poverty alleviation, and greater access to capital availability are necessary. Yet, we lack evidence of successful case studies that can easily be replicated at a larger scale.

While our review of available policies to tackle root causes did not aim to be exhaustive, in terms of policy alternatives, nor across contexts, our findings



confirm the crucial challenges of ensuring desired effects with a justifiable use of resources. How to affect structural and complex problems with policymaking has been at the core of development research and policy, yet comprehensive solutions are still missing.

However, even in a scenario of potential high policy impact, choosing to tackle the root causes of migration in any given context comes with various dilemmas. At the core of the migration-development nexus there is a trade-off of choosing between development investments aiming to affect migration-related hardships versus the ones of the most interest and importance to local populations. Moreover, there is a case for migration management design aiming at affecting root causes of migration to focus on expansion of choices for those living in communities of origin, rather than just minimising migration aspirations per se. The expansion of choice is also more aligned with current development thinking and is more ethical.

## References

- Agwu, P., Orjiakor, C., Odii, A., Onalu, C., Nzeadibe, C., Roy, P., Onwujekwe, O., Okoye, U., 2022. Corruption during final external examinations in private secondary schools in Nigeria: Qualitative insights into operations and solutions to ‘Miracle Examination Centres.’ School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), London.
- Ajakaiye, O., Ncube, M. (2010). Infrastructure and economic development in Africa: An overview. *Journal of African economies*, 19(suppl\_1), i3-i12.
- Banerjee A., Iyer L. and Somanathan R. (2007). Public action for public goods in T.P. Schultz and J. Strauss, eds., *Handbook of Development Economics*, 4: 3117–54, Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Banerjee A., Hanna R., and Mullainathan S. (2012) Corruption. In *Handbook of Organizational Economics*, ed. R Gibbons, J Roberts. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Booth, D., 2012. Development as a collective action problem. ODI, London.
- Borjas, G. (2016) *We Wanted Workers: Unraveling the Immigration Narrative*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Bosio, E., 2023. Trust in public institutions. URL <https://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/trust-public-institutions> (accessed 11.15.23).
- Bourguignon F., and Sundberg M. (2007) Aid effectiveness—opening the black box. *American Economic Review*, 97(2): 316-321.
- Card D., Kluve J. and Weber A. (2010) Active labour market policy evaluations: A meta-analysis. *The Economic Journal*, 120: F452-F477. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2010.02387.x>
- Card D., Kluve J., Weber A. (2018) What works? A meta analysis of recent active labor market program evaluations. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 16(3): 894–931. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvx028>
- Card D. and Krueger A.B. (1993) Minimum wages and employment: A case study of the fast food industry in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at <https://www.nber.org/papers/w4509>
- Carling J., Caso N., Hagen-Zanker J., and Rubio M. (2023) *The multi-level determination of migration processes*. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. Available at [www.mignex.org/d061](http://www.mignex.org/d061).

- Caso N., Carling J., Hagen-Zanker J. and Vargas-Silva C. (2023) Migration and alternative responses to dissatisfaction. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. Available at [www.mignex.org/D062](http://www.mignex.org/D062).
- Castles, S., Van Hear, N. (2010). Root Causes, in: Global Migration Governance. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Clemens, M., Huang, C., Graham, J. and Gough, K. (2018) Migration Is What You Make It: Seven Policy Decisions that Turned Challenges into Opportunities. Washington, DC: Centre for Global Development. Available at <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/migration-what-you-make-it-seven-policy-decisions-turned-challenges-opportunities>
- Dawani, K., Sayeed, A., 2020. Anti-corruption in Pakistan's pharmaceutical sector: A political settlement analysis. School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), London.
- Echavez C., Babajanian B., Hagen-Zanker J., Akter S., and Bagaporo J.L. (2014) How do labour programmes contribute to social inclusion in Afghanistan? Evidence from BRAC's life skills education and livelihoods trainings for young women. London: ODI. Available at <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/8924.pdf>
- Erdal M.B., Godin M., Fitzmaurice M., Carling J. and Karl E. (2023) *The determination of migration through focus group data*. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. Available at [www.mignex.org/d063](http://www.mignex.org/d063)
- Fisman, R., Golden, M., 2017. How to fight corruption. *Science* 356, 803–804. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aan0815>
- Godin M., Gabrielsen Jumbert M., Lebon-McGregor E., Schweers J. and Hatleskog Tjønn M. (2022) *Internal (in)coherence in European migration policies*. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo. Available at <https://www.mignex.org/d092>
- Grindle, M.S., 2004. Good Enough Governance: Poverty Reduction and Reform in Developing Countries. *Governance* 17, 525–548. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0952-1895.2004.00256.x>
- Grohmann, A., Klühs, T., & Menkhoff, L. (2018). Does financial literacy improve financial inclusion? Cross country evidence. *World Development*, 111, 84-96.
- Holden, S. T., Otsuka, K. (2014). The roles of land tenure reforms and land markets in the context of population growth and land use intensification in Africa. *Food Policy*, 48, 88-97.
- Khan, M., Roy, P., n.d. Making anti-corruption real: using a “Power Capabilities and Interest Approach” to stop wasting money and start making progress. School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), London.
- Kluve J., Puerto S., Robalino D., Romero J.M., Rother F., Stöterau J., Weidenkaff F., Witte M. (2019) Do youth employment programs improve labor market outcomes? A quantitative review. *World Development*, 114: 237-253.
- Levy, B., 2014. Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies. Oxford University Press.
- McCullough, A., Papoulidis, J., 2020. Why we need to rethink our understanding of state legitimacy to address fragility. URL <https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/why-we-need-rethink-our-understanding-state-legitimacy-address-fragility> (accessed 11.15.23).
- McCullough, A., Toru, S., 2019. Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium | Why services won't always buy legitimacy: everyday experiences of the state in Swat, Pakistan. ODI, London.
- Nanda V.P. (2006) The "Good Governance" Concept Revisited. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 603: 269-283.
- Nixon, H., Mallett, R., 2017. Service delivery, public perceptions and state legitimacy: findings from the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. ODI, London.
- OECD. 2017. Interrelations between Public Policies, Migration and Development. OECD, Paris.
- Olken, B.A. and Pande, R. (2012) Corruption in developing countries. *Annual Review of Economics*, 4: 479-509.

- Ozdamar O., Giovanis E., Dağlıoğlu C., and Gerede C. (2021) The effect of the 2008 employment support programme on young men's labour market outcomes in Turkey: Evidence from a regression discontinuity design. *The Manchester School*, 89: 276-296. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/manc.12362>
- Premand P., Brodmann S., Almeida R., Grun R., and Barouni M. (2016) Entrepreneurship education and entry into self-employment among university graduates. *World Development*, 77: 311-327.
- Rasul I. and Rogger D. (2018) Management of bureaucrats and public service delivery: Evidence from the Nigerian civil service. *The Economic Journal*, 128: 413-446. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/eoj.12418>
- Rasul I., Daniel R., Martin W.J., and Rogger D. (2018) Management and bureaucratic effectiveness: Evidence from the Ghanaian civil service. Policy Research Working Paper; No. 8595. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/30467>.
- Robalino D. 2018. How much does it cost to create a job? World Bank Jobs and Development. Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/jobs/how-much-does-it-cost-create-job>
- Rocha Menocal, A., 2015. Why corruption matters: understanding causes, effects and how to address them. Department for International Development, London.
- Rooney, J.J. and Vanden Heuvel, L.N. (2004) Root cause analysis for beginners. *Quality Progress*, 37(7): 45-53.
- Williams M.J. (2017) The political economy of unfinished development projects: Corruption, clientelism, or collective choice? *American Political Science Review*, 111(4): 705-723.